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I Called My Thesis This Because the F-Word Was Unacceptable in the Original Title
That I Presented to the University Library

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Early Works

My early work consisted of highly aestheticized photographs of natural objects taken in extreme close-up. Working as a self-described scientist, I used an unusual macro camera lens (Canon MP-E 65mm) to achieve high magnification of my subject, which I isolated from disruptive vibrations in a home "lab" of sorts. The emerging patterns in backlit leaves replicated abstract satellite imagery and introduced me to the idea of fractal patterns, naturally occurring repeating patterns similar at any viewed scale. Think of the similarities between the veins in your body, the neurons in your brain, and the tributaries of a river, all three form dendritic fractals, but at massively different scales from the micrometer, the millimeter, and the kilometer, respectively. Dendrite itself is a term originating from the Greek word *dendron*, meaning tree¹; trees too share this pattern in both their branches, roots, and in the leaf structures that my original study explored.

I found a sort of god in this fractal world, an underlying order to what I previously felt as chaos. Several of the photographs had a holy stained-glass look to them (see Image 1). The religious experience was a misinterpretation for what I really saw was the vastness of the world leveled in a piece of leaf matter small than a fingernail. It was pure discovery. I later found a similar reaction in one of my favorite authors, E.O. Wilson, in his book *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* (2006):

"I had this experience at the age of eight. My parents gave me a microscope. I don't recall why, but no matter. I then found my own little world, completely

¹ Dendrite. "Oxford Dictionaries."

http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/dendrite?q=dendrite. 2014. URL.

wild and unconstrained, no plastic, no teacher, no books, no anything predictable. At first I did not know the names of the water-drop denizens or what they were doing. But neither did the pioneer microscopists. Like them, I graduated to looking at butterfly scales and other miscellaneous objects. I never thought of what I was doing in such a way, but it was pure science. As true as could be of any child so engaged, I was kin to Leeuwenhoek, who said that his work 'was not pursued in order to gain the praise I now enjoy, but chiefly from a craving after knowledge, which I notice resides in me more than most other men."

The young Wilson had discovered a new world, one I always knew existed in textbook and theory, but never really explored critically, appreciatively, and in wonder until I was in my thirties. Finding Wilson's words on the matter was the discovery of a kindred spirit of sorts and affirmation that these works had true value. He knew what pure discovery was and I liken it to art in its purest sense, that spark in the head that sets the world of an artist on fire.

The work, however, was criticized for its apparent aesthetic bent instead of its concept of oneness. I grudgingly acquiesced to the criticism, as my conceptual ideas of photography were relatively weak and even today I still see photography, often, as a highly aestheticized form of art. I knew in my heart though what these works meant, but I felt no reason to defend the work against those who did not see the connections between the micro world and the macro world, the very essence of seeing reality.

My response (read: fuck you) was the creation of the most unaesthetic photograph that I could think of, a black square, created by photographing with the lens cap on. I was

attempting to reject not only my aesthetic bias towards the medium but also working that rejection into the conceptual underpinnings of the subject. The work was originally titled *Portrait of the Prophet*, a response to the violent outbreaks worldwide following the posting of the now infamous movie *Innocence of Muslims* to YouTube. The Benghazi Incident was a sort of pinnacle response to the many other violent outbursts over the last decade in response to the, often unflattering, imagery of the Prophet Mohammed.

Iconoclasm, however, is not an idea strictly in place in Islam, but is prevalent throughout the Abrahamic traditions. Early Christianity shied away from figural representations, as did Judaism. The rules often sway between a conservative and liberal view of iconography, even in Islam. I changed the title to *Portrait of a Prophet* to account for this more universal abhorrence to icons throughout Abrahamic religions.

The reason of the piece was to simply ask, “What imagery is permissible?” It may be difficult to understand from a Westernized, and especially American, point-of-view. To an American, insult is a form of free speech, even the most disgusting of speech. We take pride in our ability to say what we need in order to disrupt governmental interference into our social, religious, and political activities. My work is not meant as an insult but to question where the line is drawn, where it should be drawn. The image, in concept, is a representation of all Abrahamic prophets, including Mohammed. What the viewer interprets as the content of the photograph is subjective to the viewer. It could be offensive; it could be benign, but either case to a fundamentalist is cause for protest.

Into the Pit

When *Separation* was conceived it was to recreate Palestine in its final form, the free and independent state of Palestine. A twenty-foot diameter circle of solid-cap concrete blocks filled with sand, barren and lifeless. The 25-foot tall concrete barrier that exists today was reduced to a 16-inch tall series of these concrete blocks. Installed in a smaller 14-foot circle in the Marsh Gallery at Herron School of Art and Design (Image 3) for the first time, it was stark and minimal. The reduction in scale could indicate a scale model on display or the unneeded 25-foot height of the original wall to guard against a pitiful stretch of unpopulated sand.

Concrete holds several different connotations in Palestine. Most houses are constructed of concrete, beginning with the minuscule refugee homes the UN originally placed in the refugee camps to the now four-story tall family homes being built on the hillside of Dheisheh Camp located outside of Bethlehem. Concrete is also the primary ingredient of the Separation barrier between Israel and the West Bank in the most populated areas; other areas are simply rows of chain link and razor wire, in some way more cruel when the displaced can literally look through the fence at their old homes. Concrete's third trifacta is in its roots with the Roman Empire, the first civilization to use concrete on a large scale. Roman Imperialism was rampant throughout Palestine in New Testament times forever changing the social landscape; British Imperialism in the 19th and 20th century altered the political landscape. A land perched between Eastern and Western empires.

Once the gallery opened, the Americans filled the room and looked at the sandbox dominating the center of the gallery. One entered, more followed. They played and laughed. Even I partook in the celebration of a sandbox in the gallery. The "young Zionist" pushed a plastic toy bulldozer, retrieved from another studio, through the space, most onlookers

unaware that the bulldozer to the Palestinian is the sign of the oppressor coming to tear down their home.

People enjoyed the interaction, the freedom to take off your shoes and walk through the sand in the middle of a gallery, to draw in the sand and make an impermanent mark. They laughed. I cried inside as realization came. This was all too familiar. The truth of the piece was muddled into a community event, a bringing of people together. It was an attractive nuisance and its form of a circle was an invitation to gather and play. My unwept tears were for the obvious Imperialism that pervaded the gallery. In the words of Rage Against the Machine, “We kill them off, take their land, and go there for vacation”. The circle was not only the semblance of surrounding one’s enemy it was *The Circle*. It is the circle that dominates our history, the history of our repetition. It must only be natural that we repeat ourselves; it sustains our identity, our comfort zone. It also keeps the world in balance. We are the water cycle, we are the Planet Earth going around the sun while we spin in our own circle in a dance with the lunatics. We eat our own shit, it is called the carbon cycle.

Every person in the gallery was the oppressor. We invaded this representation of someone else’s space and made it our own. We made it into a spot for entertainment. Not only did we invade this future Palestine; we invaded the graveyard of Palestine, the remnant of a remnant, and danced on the graves of the refugees.

The redeeming quality of the work was its shift in the artist. A shift from a static representational form into one that was interactive, one that was unpredictable. The simple leap from object-based to performance-based work in my practice began at this gallery opening and returned in several more pieces of my work.

Cessation

One cannot understand the truly devious nature of addiction until one attempts to destroy it. The realization in the neocortex that your addiction is killing you yet the reptilian brain creates the physical drive of continued consumption. Smokers know this urge all too well. My attempts to destroy the urge were always failures; I let the animal win every time. I knew I could not do it alone so I invented a strategy to overcome the animal and free the human.

Reward came out of the idea that the community could be co-opted to help alleviate my addiction to smoking cigarettes. Smoking already has an element of public shaming that has developed over the past few decades. I hoped to lasso this shame and put myself front and center in my attempts at cessation. Modeling a reward poster based, in part, on FBI wanted posters I created *Reward*. The poster has my mug shot along with identifying features (Image 4). The tagline at the bottom promised a twenty-dollar reward to anyone that caught me smoking a cigarette.

These posters were placed within my immediate community, around campus, and a slightly altered one was placed as an ad in *Nuvo*, a weekly local arts paper. The *Nuvo* ad was necessary to create a sense of danger to myself in the Indianapolis metropolitan area that the initial *Reward* posters could not possibly cover. I needed to be sure I was not simply protecting myself by only instigating the population on campus to catch me in the act: I needed the entire city to come and get me.

My first encounter with someone was ten-minutes after placing posters on a single floor of Eskenazi Hall. As I was getting onto an elevator a faculty member I had never

interacted with stepped off and asked if I had been smoking. This immediately set off alarm bells, not for fear of getting caught, but the realization that I placed my face out there and was now recognizable to essentially complete strangers. I destroyed my anonymity, my solace. Once again, like with Separation, I created a work that had unintended consequences. I've come to accept that in my rash practice.

Other encounters were much more nuanced; walking down the hall I'd see people look at me and you could see the note of recognition in their eyes and on their face. Strangers would call to me about catching me for the reward or to ask if I was still smoking. One student even said it gave her the inspiration to try and quit. Months later someone even called me out having seen my ad in *Nuvo*, which gave me some satisfaction in spending so much money for an ad I was not even sure was noticed.

The most epic of encounters occurred during a poster raid on the business building on campus. I had decided to make sure I included the entire campus community and not just the art buildings in my endeavors to help proliferate my immediate community with my experiment. While in the faculty office hallway one gentleman stepped off the elevator holding my poster. As he started to enter his office he looked up at me and asked if this was me on the poster. I confirmed and he beckoned me into his office where he began to accuse me of creating an offensive poster. I asked him what he found offensive and he pointed to the ethnicity descriptor on the poster. The faculty member claimed that "American" was not an ethnicity. I countered that this was taken directly from an actual F.B.I. reward poster to prove the precedent of the term in the context in which I used it. He continued to argue that it was not and was in fact insensitive; his prolific use of multiple forms of "fuck" seemed to indicate he was quite distressed. I asked him what he defined ethnicity as and he answered it

was the culture in which you were raised. I had him by balls now. I retorted that I was raised in America and therefore my culture was American then queried if he denied the existence of American culture. Then in true form of the defeated but empowered he asked if I had permission to place these in the building. I laughed and left his office without replying. Fuck no I don't have permission; what would be the fun in that?

In conclusion of this project *Reward* was a failure on many levels in rectifying my smoking problem. I simply became a closet smoker, or perhaps amore appropriate term would be a bathroom smoker, retreating to the most private of places to enjoy a cigarette in solace. Only one person ever caught me; most who ever saw me smoking either did not confront me or did not know about the reward. On a personal note though I defeated smoking cigarette by switching to a nicotine inhaler (vaporizer).

I am tempted to call this entire project a work in socially engaged art practice. Helguera (2011) summarizes a socially engaged art (SEA) as follows:

“...social interaction occupies a central and inextricable part of any socially engaged artwork. SEA is a hybrid, multi-disciplinary activity that exists somewhere between art and non-art, and its state may be permanently unresolved. SEA depends on actual—not imagined or hypothetical—social action.”

Based on Helguera's definition this work qualifies as an SEA because it is a hybrid of 2D media (printmaking, photography, and computer-aided design) in the poster and the *Nuvo* advertisement, and a sort of performance art in the interactions it created as a result of the posters and advertisement. *Reward* also was an actual attempt to quit smoking, not simply a

toy project to elicit reaction. The reality of the situation was true and my reason for creating it was real as are the consequences of success or failure.

Text Messaging

Let us consider the two-sidedness of human interaction. Small talk is just that, that strange convention of taking and not really saying anything to simply fill the void between people who have nothing to say to each other (usually because they don't really know each other), but attempting polite conversation. A simple hello is not enough, for some reason you need to stop and talk to acquaintances or near strangers so that simple lies can be exchanged. Maintaining civility in public perhaps revolves around this small talk with near strangers.

The first in this series of works, collectively titled *Topics of Conversation*, looks into the small talk phenomenon and human social interaction. Titled Two Lies (Image 5), this simple text piece that points its finger at perhaps the most common lie among us. The text reads, "Hello, how are you?" with the reply "I'm fine." Each statement is a lie, you know that already though. Do you really care how this pseudo-stranger is? Who is *fine* and do you really want to hear their baggage? Avoidance of this question may seem rude by convention and answering the question in honesty just turns off the person who posed the question. This is a pointless question with a pointless answer; why do we even bother asking it? Is it the satisfaction of our own ego?

A tangent from the small talk is conversation you make with colleagues or pseudo-friends, those people whom you have an acquaintance with, occasionally work with, and perhaps even friended in the (anti) social media networks. Often you maintain an air of civility with them for practical purposes while thinking of a constant escape. It is all part of

feeding your own ego and the ego of others with veiled words to maintain the thinnest firmament of civility. It only gets juicier when you turn your back on them and the true nature of the relationship can emerge.

Four pieces of text work fall under this category forming a commentary on my observations of human interaction. The first is perhaps the most politically loaded of the four and simply states: “An open, **honest** conversation with your hand picked tools”. We see it everywhere, politics, business and academia (though I often wonder the actual difference of the three) especially whereupon the masters immediately introduce bias by placing at the forefront the groomed spokesperson of misinformation for the sake of selling an idea. Deviants are not welcome here. Truth is not welcome here. Expectations must be enforced to the most extreme and when undelivered despondency settles in much to the absent chagrin of the master holding your money.

The second piece confronts truth in conversation. It is a simple yet much used text piece of dictionary definitions that I call *Synonyms*. The definitions are given for the words *tact* and *deception* but the word *tact* is followed by the definition of *deception* and vice versa. The piece is plainly stating that these words are interchangeable. The use of *tact* to pad the conversation with lies is *deception*. At some point coddling became more important than truth, calling something that it is creates unacceptable friction and damage to the ego, never mind the truth or need to be direct. *Tact* breeds false security through *deception*.

The third piece brings *deception* home to the “friend” front. This untitled piece states “Look me in the eyes and smile while you stab me in the back”. This purely observation based but it directly addresses how one speaks to another in person and in the

presence of others. Facebook friends and colleagues smile to each other while plotting each other's destruction.

The final piece, named *Interpersonal Skills*, is my rebuttal to them all, especially the third/untitled piece. It is both personal and impersonal, "Don't worry. You'll see me coming from a mile away, **knife in hand**." It is honesty at the cost of society. In many ways people do not want honesty as it destroys their ego but the lack of honesty has in part created much of our modern societal problems. This statement is simply a testament that I treat you as I see you and more often than not that is with simple disinterest. I'll make no overtones when I attack, you'll know it for what it is. I will not invade your country for resources and call it promoting freedom. I will not act like I understand your art when I do not. I will call you out on bullshit just as I want you to call me out on mine; we need this dose of reality to overcome our lying ego.

Newspaperradiotvinternet and Helvetica

The majority of our information comes through a narrow channel of "unbiased" media conglomerates who more often than not seem to cannibalize each others works in lieu of creating original content. Decisions of what should and should not be shown is akin to a political committee parsing out selected bits of (mis)information based on the latest Pew Research Poll. Language is repeated ad nauseum to the point of self-destruction.

Programming tackles the issue of language and its abuse in the media. Say "murder", say it again and again and again and again and again and again. It stops being "murder" and dissolves into a meaningless nothing:

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Take all our language and apply the current state of the media to it. Desensitization occurs rapidly. Apply this to something you care about, even obscure ideas like truth, justice, and liberty. What do we get? We get nothing but an apathetic culture that no longer can understand even the basic principles of the language, of the meaning of the words themselves.

Programming's formal elements are several rows of white copier paper tacked to the wall in a grid. In the first column each piece of paper has a word which is clearly visible and each successive column working from left to right sees the word in the first column slowly fade into nothingness. Each word has some significance in the media or its overuse in the media including its use by politicians who really are nothing but a media figure with the same corporate master. The reproduction of each word is through the use of now-archaic carbon paper, an early symbol of bureaucracy from a time when media was produced on a typewriter. Using this discarded tech in a way to criticize modern media's electronic regurgitation of the same one-sided argument leaves a sweet taste in my mouth.

Let us not ignore the typeface of the piece either. *Programming*, like all of my text-based pieces, uses Helvetica. Born out of utility for its legibility in post-WWII Europe, Helvetica was considered a modernist typeface: rational, ideal, but with some hope in its ability to enact social responsibility. Naturally, it's Swiss. "Gridnik," as he is known in the

design world, described Helvetica as having no meaning in itself, it is machined and neutral.² The ubiquitous nature of the type however created meaning for Helvetica as it became the symbol of corporatism. The corporate co-opted Helvetica in an attempt to look approachable, human, and non-oppressive according to designer Leslie Savan.³ Even perhaps the most well known designer of today, Steven Sagmeister, says of work using it “Do not read me, I’ll bore the shit out of you.”⁴ What better font is there to use than the font once heralded as being for the people, for social responsibility and then co-opted into the corporate monster of consumption. It perfectly mimics the state of the media for *Programming* and for my other works as well. In many ways using it is a way to co-opt the co-opter, to return that which is ours. This could be simply a self-inflicted ruse as Helvetica always has been privately owned and in that its use to free us from hegemony is a fabrication. If that is the case, using the master’s weapon to slay him seems like justice (whatever the hell that is).

Textual Harassment

Following in the same aesthetic vein of *Topics of Conversation*, I decided to tease the art world instead of human interaction. Dubbed *Sham-ing Art*, the pieces are 16”x16” posters with Helvetica text. These pieces, however, were more site-specific, being located within the main art building at Herron School of Art and Design, Eskenazi Hall. The works were responses to things I heard faculty tell students or myself or general conceptions gained

² *Helvetica*. Directed by Gary Hustwit. 2007. London: Swiss Dots. Streamed.

³ *Helvetica*. Directed by Gary Hustwit. 2007. London: Swiss Dots. Streamed.

⁴ *ibid*

through various readings about the art world and its problems. Several were also making made in completely satirical ways teasing the fools who initially said them, a Stephen Colbert tactic if you will.

The beauty of the work was that it was an interactive piece, though not necessarily an obvious one. The interactivity derived from people defacing the posters or simply destroying them. One particular work (Image 8) was placed near some vending machines and received two responses. I went ahead and added a response of my own. The dialogue goes, “This is my attempt to produce cheap ass art and pass it off as something worth a hell of a lot more.” The insulted responds, “This is my attempt to tell you to go fuck yourself.” A third party adds, “he probably loves your response”. I give a simple reply, “CORRECT”.

This particular sign baited someone who took it to be completely literal. I wonder if that is because the sign was close to the furniture design department; the kind of department where outsiders might say, “Furniture is art?” Yes, it can certainly be art, just like the work I put onto the wall. The sign and a many pieces of furniture are really on opposite spectrums; one highly conceptual, the other highly crafted. Both can get a bad rap when an uneducated art critic comes along. I would assume an average furniture student who spends dozens of hours on a single project might actually agree with the literal interpretation of my 15-minute⁵ piece of work.

In reality, though, I am mocking craft and the idea that craft creates a work of art or even creates the bulk of the work. I fail to see how craft has anything to do with art unless it is also tied to the concept of the work. The craft cannot be the foundation of the artwork. The concept is the foundation otherwise you have well-crafted bad art.

⁵ Most of that time was simply loading the printer with a roll of paper.

I need to lay out my own bias though against craft. I have no formal training beyond the most rudimentary courses in any medium. I took one film photography, one drawing, one painting, and one sculpture class in my undergraduate years; the latter two were over a decade before I ever considered being an artist and the photography course was long after I was well-versed in using a digital camera. I am essentially self-trained in photography and when it comes to craft that is the medium I am most capable in, but as stated before, I am not drawn to photography as an art form. The medium is simply a means to the concept, the idea.

Let's look at another sign; this one (Image 9) sat in the main stairwell of Eskenazi Hall for over four months. One of the reasons for its long life I suspect is that I needed a ladder to place it in that location. The text simply reads, "This is gallery ready." The photos show the work in two altered stages. The first stage took place after about two months of being on display. Someone jumped up and tried to pull the work down, ripping the paper but maintain the overall work. A few months later someone managed to get most of it off the wall but in a seemingly ironic way left the most important word "This" up on the wall. Note the peeled paint in the bottom picture, courtesy of the Duotack I used to adhere the signs to the wall.

Too often I have heard professors lament on student's work not being finished or even more so not being framed. There was an inherent obsession about displaying work in a gallery, as though that were the pinnacle of the art world. Perhaps it is the pinnacle of the art business. If the administration is teaching students the business of art then the course is missing from the curriculum.

As a whole the work is ready for a gallery. Print it up and slap it on the wall with some Duotack. Conceptually, it doesn't really belong in a gallery; it belongs in any art school, every art school, to remind students that art does not revolve around a gallery system. Place your art into its context, a context driven by its concept.

The next sign (Image 10) I placed gave me a chuckle when I viewed its edits; Originally it read: "If I knew I would be reading this much in art school I would have went elsewhere and made a real difference in the world, like law school." Someone apparently had an issue with my use of the word "went" and decided the word "gone" was the proper use of English. The words seem interchangeable to me, but the sound of the phrase using the word "gone" gives me hillbilly shivers. Really, it makes sense in the context of Herron School of Art and Design being located in Indiana. People from Indiana are known as Hoosiers, which, in the South, essentially was an insult akin to calling someone a hillbilly⁶. I found great amusement that someone would needlessly correct my English and make it sound more Hoosier in the process.

This sign I call a venting sign (read that as a bitching sign); it came from being fed up at the amount of reading we were expected to do, and by reading I mean the dense, boring kind translated from French. Feel free to burn this thesis if I ever go there. The reading is just the first, and lesser, part of the frustration. The primary frustration comes from multiple people telling me that art is not really a good way to change world. Ouch, that kind of hurt. I just think, "What the fuck else is art good for then?" Is art simply a shrill voice to ignore? Is art just something decorative? Hell, if art is a poor method for changing the world I really don't know why I went to graduate school. I know, to make identity work, yes definitely.

⁶ <http://www.indiana.edu/~librcsd/internet/extra/hoosier.html>

This sign also has a second level of meaning, the exact opposite. How would going to law school actually improve the world? The majority of the people that represent the citizens are law school graduates. Are they really doing much good in the world? The current Congress, now dubbed the Do-Nothing Congress, has earned the infamous title by their inability to compromise and essentially have done little but play politics. As an artist I see this as an indication that my pursuit of art is no worse than this particular group of law school graduates. The message was a jab at the inherent uselessness many people feel when the term lawyer is bandied about, just as it is the fear of so many parents when their child comes home from college to announce their declaration as an art major (or art history major, thanks Obama⁷).

Several other signs were placed around the building with varying degrees of vandalism. Several were simply removed; if they were vandalized I never noticed or had the opportunity to record it. One received a healthy dose of blue paint, which dripped down the wall, another received a comment along the lines of not caring for these signs (which was odd because the only way to have written that comment on the sign was to get up on a bench and reach for the sign, not exactly something an apathetic person would do).

bench.slap

A culminating project was required to display my ability as an artist. My work lacked the final push into the real world; it stagnated on campus. I needed to look at the city of Indianapolis and find the mode that my signs would take. Billboards were suggested but I felt were unfeasible, both monetarily and conceptually. I needed a mode that was within

⁷ <http://www.politico.com/story/2014/02/president-obama-apologizes-to-art-history-professor-103626.html>

reach of a common person and most billboards would require a ladder and trespassing for a common person to be able to respond to them. Billboards are also ugly, a blight on the cityscape.

I had chanced upon an interesting bus bench one day. It had an advertisement that had been defaced; part of the phone number had been ripped off the bench. A sticker applied by the city stated the bench was an illegal advertisement; I assume the city defaced the phone number. A bench seemed like a perfect mode of communication. It is small so it takes some observant person to notice it but also useful to the average walker. I liked the idea that it would be a benefit even if the message were lost to defacement or ignorance. It also was most beneficial to the “slow” people; the people who notice the finer points of world that you may miss driving a car or riding a bicycle down the street at 20-30 miles per hour.

I decided on the bench as the platform for my message. It seems less a nuisance than a wheat pasted sign or even a billboard advertisement, and the bench still serves a function even if the message is obscured. The bench is a community space where free speech and expression are on display; the bench is public and free to use by anyone. I exert my freedom of expression by placing these benches in their location without authorization. The act itself could be considered anti-community, dumping benches with "advertisements" onto the street. However, supplanting the community is sometimes needed to realize an unpopular message or one that challenges willful ignorance. Any authority, even a benevolent community, needs to be challenged on occasion and the artist will accept the consequences. The main expectation is the removal of the offending benches. The greatest risk would be an interaction with law enforcement during the installation and, though less likely, post-

installation; I would expect to find an extremely anal bureaucrat pursuing any investigation into a couple of benches.

The bench design was fashioned by a well-known conservationist, Aldo Leopold. Leopold helped create wilderness areas throughout the United States preserving pristine natural habitats. The bench is easily manufactured using a minimal amount of raw materials keeping it efficient. Creating a strong, useful product that can be repurposed is an important component to this project. I would prefer the benches to be used even if that means being repainted or having the message somehow defaced. Most importantly is that the bench is easy to install and easy to transport in a mid-sized car. I pre-constructed each bench in the studio and then removed the seat and backrest portion, this left the leg sections still assembled. Assembly on-site simply meant screwing the seat and bench onto the two leg sections; a process that took less than 5 minutes. Expedited construction allowed me to quickly place the benches before nosy citizens, law enforcement, or property owners could intervene.

The process of the creating the benches began by adapting some of the signs I had previously created but did not exhibit into a format that could work on the sign's backrest, which as built measured 9" x 42" in useable space. Most of the text ended up being between 1.5" and 3" tall depending on the length of the text. The benches, like my signs, are pure white with black text. The text was applied to the painted benches using a silk-screen printing method. The silk-screened area was then sprayed with an acrylic finish to help protect the water-soluble ink from the elements.

The messages were varied in content and they were equally written with a particular location in mind or with no location in mind but with the location to be discovered during

installation. Sometimes the location of the where I placed the bench serendipitously realized the content of the message in a rather dramatic way once I looked over the documentation. In any case the location of each bench was as important as the message on it. The most important factor for me overall was that the benches, like the signs, would evoke a response in the viewer. The response was always the goal.

After a week outdoors the finish tended to yellow rather dramatically. At first this bothered me but then I realized that this was simply entropy at work. It was also anti-art world, in that most artists strive for some type of archival quality to there work, and if not the artist, the gallery and buyers certainly want the work to last unaltered for value purposes. I needed to remember to channel Eva Hesse while these were built and displayed, and overcome the indoctrination of the art mass. On the end all of these benches would be at the mercy of the elements. I used untreated lumber for every bench except one, the treated bench was mainly a mistake as the treatment would leech through the white paint and also bubble the paint. The untreated lumber added to the natural change of the object as it degrades into dust.

Bench III (There is no better high than discovery.) was placed into the largest park in the Indianapolis area, Eagle Creek Metro Park, on the northeast side (Image 14). The bench was placed off the beaten path, but an observant eye could see it through the defoliated winter forestscape. It is a reward to the initiated that wonders off the path to explore the true riches of nature instead of the usual fare that every pathtaker follows. It is just within reach of the path's sight in an effort to pique the curiosity of the wanderer and to give them the enticement to explore further, explore deeper. I suspect an even greater achievement will be

wrought in its discovery in the midsummer tangle of briars and brush should the bench still exist in that space.

The text on Bench III, “There is no better high than discovery.” is a quote from E.O. Wilson⁸. Once again I refer to one of the most philosophical scientists of our times. Wilson is completely tuned to the importance of scientific discovery and its relations to our society. He understands that the complexities of nature are beyond the our current understanding in any other field including art, a field I believe that is limited only in the capacity of the human mind. The following quote by Wilson in a way echoes this sentiment, “In a purely technical sense, each species of higher organism—beetle, moss, and so forth, is richer in information than a Caravaggio painting, Mozart symphony, or any other great work of art.”⁹ Wilson recognizes the complexity of nature and with that the ecstasy in the infinite discovery available to humans in its exploration. I find the quote particularly humorous in the context of an MFA thesis.

Bench IV (Support Our Troops) is one a few benches I lump into the phone number series (Image 15). The bench contains the text “SUPPORT OUR TROOPS” with a phone number underneath it. The number is the joke and supports the context for which this bench is placed. Calling the number provided will connect the caller to QVC, a cable television shopping channel that is still in business despite the rise of the internet. The bench is mocking former President George W. Bush’s speech in 2006 to encourage people to shop

⁸ *The Scientist magazine*, Volume 18, Issue 1 (Interview; 19 January 2004)

⁹ “*The Biological Diversity Crisis: A Challenge to Science*”, *Issues in Science and Technology* (Fall 1985), 2:1, 22.

more¹⁰. This speech was delivered as the market was still recovering from its post 9/11 crash. The connection between our capitalistic culture of consumption is simple: eat, drink, be merry, and do not pay attention to the multiple wars. While we are fat and happy our representatives and administration is pushing forward the still-going war for oil conquest. The mindset is as archaic as shopping on QVC.

The placement of *Bench IV* is along Lafayette Road in front of a relatively run-down, yet still active, strip mall. The line of stores, with their bright signs, contrasts against a ruddy parking lot. This bench actually serves a utilitarian purpose also being located next to a bus stop; capitalism and “socialism” are present here.

Bench V (Discover Jesus) is the second of the phone number series of benches. The bench simply states “DISCOVER JESUS” with the phone number to the local Air Force recruitment center (Image 16). On the surface this is simply a rip on Air Force Academy’s Christian indoctrination of the cadets¹¹. This is readily apparent in a statement made by Brigadier General Cecil R. Richardson, deputy chief of chaplains for the Air Force, ““We will not proselytize, but we reserve the right to evangelize the unchurched.”¹² A rather conflicting statement by one in high command that shows the sort of double talk inherent to fundamentalist thinking. It is all the more disturbing when you think of the apocalyptic visions of Revelations and realize that the Air Force commands the nuclear missile silos.

Exploring the content of Jesus’ view on war without writing an exegesis on the subject let’s turn to the most famous of Jesus’ sayings on violence, Matthew 5:39 which states “**But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other**

¹⁰ <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/20/washington/20text-bush.html?pagewanted=all>

¹¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/23/politics/23academy.html?pagewanted=all>

¹² <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/12/national/12chaplains.html?pagewanted=all>

to him also.”¹³ Jesus is essentially saying to take the hit and offer your other cheek to be harmed, acting back in kind does nothing for the Christian. John Piper, the chancellor at Bethlehem College & Seminary, a prolific writer on Theology, and founder of desiringgod.com, wrote an interesting piece the day after 9/11 discussing the reconciliation of using violence, namely state-sanctioned war, as retaliation while still maintaining Christian values. Quoting Piper:

Therefore some of God's divine rights as God are given to governments for the purposes of restraining evil and maintaining social order under just laws. This is what Paul means when he writes, "There is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. . . . [This authority is] a minister of God to you for good . . . it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil" (Romans 13:1-4).¹⁴

Essentially the United States is ordained by God to carry out his justice even though God as man tells us to turn the other cheek. Many of Piper's quotes come from the Epistles of Paul, not the Four Gospels that actually describe the life and words of Jesus. Perhaps I am being presumptive in placing a greater authority in the Gospels over the Epistles; after all, both are infallible according to basic Christian doctrine.

I prefer to think of Jesus as the activist pacifist who played good tricks on the Romans as a means of revolution. Take Matthew 5:41, “**And whoever compels you to go one mile,**

¹³ New King James Version translation

¹⁴ <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/terrorism-justice-and-loving-our-enemies>

go with him two.”¹⁵ Dr. Julie Hart, my undergraduate non-violent social action professor and in my mind the most authentic Christian I have ever met, relayed a rather interesting explanation for this particular verse. Roman law allowed for a soldier to force a subject to carry their pack for them. Abuse of this law and complaints from the subjects led the Romans to enact a limit of one mile that any subject could carry the pack. Jesus in an effort to cause civil disobedience urged his congregation to gain consent from the soldier to allow them to carry the pack a second mile. The second mile was forbidden and any soldier who broke Roman law was subject to severe punishment. This is turning the other cheek to figuratively spit on authority. Jesus was a pacifist but he was also an active participant in civil disobedience; much like my benches, active in disobedience in a non-confrontational and ambiguous way.

Bench V was placed in a shopping center one Keystone Avenue in Indianapolis. It is in front of a Wal-Mart and sitting on the bench you face a McDonalds, the two most ubiquitous companies in the United States. McDonalds and Wal-Mart are both consistently targets of groups seeking to unionize or establish a higher standard of living for their employees. Wal-Mart is also known for censorship especially when it comes to music; they even have a policy that dictates what music they sell and how it is labeled¹⁶. I find the music censorship particularly intriguing; the last time I was begrudgingly inside a Wal-Mart I noticed an entire end-cap display devoted solely to *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its sequels. In general, Wal-Mart is associated with low-class Americans and has even spawned a *People of Wal-Mart* website mocking the various human oddities that frequent the store¹⁷. The bench

¹⁵ New King James Version translation

¹⁶ <http://www.walmart.com/cp/Music-Content-Policy/547092>

¹⁷ <http://www.peopleofwalmart.com/>

location seemed appropriate where we could mix Jesus, the military, Wal-Mart, and fast food into one orgy of sadly American stereotypes.

Bench VI (Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds) is the second bench that contains a famous quote (Image 17). This quote comes from the Bhagavad Gita, a scripture in the Hindu epic Mahabharata, that J. Robert Oppenheimer translated after teaching himself Sanskrit. The quote is often associated with Oppenheimer, as he has been recorded discussing this particular verse in an interview. Oppenheimer states:

We knew the world would not be the same, a few people laughed, a few people cried, most people were silent. I remember the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita. Vishnu is trying to persuade the prince, he should do his duty, and to impress him, takes on his multi-armed form and says: "Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds". I suppose we all thought that, one way or another.¹⁸

This excerpt came from an interview by Oppenheimer after witnessing the first nuclear bomb test. Watching the video you can see the pain in his eyes and on his face. His subsequent suicide speaks volumes about a man who helped create one of the most destructive weapons in human history.

Bench VI is placed on the corner of 10th Street and Holt Road in Indianapolis. Diagonally across the intersection is a large oil distribution center. Further down the road is a paint shop. When driving through this area a particular chemical odor permeates the air; I don't know the source but it is alarming nonetheless. The documentation of Bench VI shows a residential neighborhood with a swing set; a stark contrast to the industrial sites across the street. I do not want to imagine the

¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixb7MdeR8yU>

chemicals both visible and invisible to the olfactory cells that these people are exposed to on a daily basis. Petroleum storage tanks, by their design, vent into the atmosphere to control internal tank pressure.¹⁹ Even regulated storage tanks vent volatile organic compounds²⁰, which cannot always be seen with the naked eye and are often odorless.

The point I am making, by placing this bench adjacent to an industrial chemical site, is that death comes in many forms. For Oppenheimer it was the immediate death by nuclear blast, the ultimate form of fear that propelled our country into decades of Cold War nuclear armament. All the while we created an entire economy based on petroleum and to a larger degree highly volatile and often-untested chemicals resulting in slow death by cancer and the modern epidemics of ADHD, autism, and reproductive issues²¹. We are killing our biosphere (which includes ourselves) for gasoline, lipstick, and ironically cleaning products.

Bench VII (Confess) is the third phone number bench (Image 18). It asks the viewer to “CONFESS” and gives the phone number to the local F.B.I. office. We are all sinners and perhaps even traitors to America, you may even see them as one and the same. You should call the F.B.I. to confess your sins; they, like the divine, already know your sins. Confess now and perhaps leniency will be granted. Revelations made by Edward Snowden revealed our government’s hunger for data, all data, no matter how mundane. Warehouse-sized computers sift our private data; correlations are made to determine threat levels. Naturally, actual results are never given to citizens, only assurances that this program or that program helped to defeat

¹⁹ http://petrowiki.org/PEH%3AOil_Storage

²⁰ <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2013-09-23/pdf/2013-22010.pdf>

²¹ <http://webapps.sph.harvard.edu/accordentG2/toxic-20140206/index.htm#>

the terrorists. We are all subject to the scrutiny of the government by police state, for the police state.

A surprise bonus came out of the documentation of Bench VII. I originally placed the bench at West and St. Clair streets because it is a major thoroughfare for commuters from the northeast side going into downtown to work. After documenting the work and looking for carefully at the photographs I realized that a Catholic Church was visible in background. The church generated double meaning with the work, referencing the Catholic tradition of the confessional. It helped to make the work even more ambiguous. Also several American flags are visible in the surrounding area, one is quite visible just down the street, but two more are visible atop the Indiana Statehouse and atop the One America building further downtown. The trinity of the American Flags coupled with the Catholic Church created a strong affinity to the content of the bench, content and concept in a head-on collision.

Bench VIII (Sit Alone) is the first bench that has a direct interactivity aspect about it (Image 19). The words “Sit” and “Alone” are well spaced for a reason. The bench is wide enough to accommodate two people. A lone user may sit on one side of the bench blocking the word “Sit” and leaving only the word “Alone” revealed. This can be interpreted in two ways: it could indicate that the user wants to be left alone or it could indicate that the user is alone. The user may instead sit on the other end of the bench blocking out the word “Alone” and revealing only the word “Sit” indicating an invitation to another person to sit down and join the initial user.

Bench VIII is located at 10th Street and Dorman Street, at the bus stop on the north side of 10th Street. It is usable whether the message persists or not. It is also

located at the edge of a revitalized neighborhood, Cottage Home, which has a strong community vibe present in the neighborhood. Community gardens and a community self-service library exist in Cottage Home. Dorman Street is home to a popular bar frequented by many Herron students, a community in and of themselves. The bench gives the user the opportunity to participate or to be left alone, a dual sided look at respect.

A small bonus in the documentation of this bench is the Indianapolis Police Car parked in the background; a close inspection of the full sized photos reveals a curious officer on the lookout even though no intervention occurred during the bench's installation. A second bonus met me the morning after installing this bench. The bench is near my current residence in an adjacent neighborhood. While passing, I noticed a woman walking her dog and stopping to take a quick snapshot of the bench with her phone. It gave me a singular regret of not creating a hashtag to associate with these benches.

Bench IX (Profit) and Bench X (Prison) is currently the only dual benches (Image 20). They are two sides of the same dollar bill. Bench X is also the only bench featuring a black paint scheme with white text, an inversion of the other benches' color palette. The idea for this pair came from an artist's talk by Richard Ross at Herron School of Art and Design outlining his *Juvenile in Justice* project. The project takes a hard look at our nation's habitual imprisonment of young adults and the institutional racism that is propagated by the juvenile incarceration industry and mirrored in the correctional industry as a whole²². The idea of a for-profit prison

²² <http://www.juvenile-in-justice.com/>

system is wrought with moral pitfalls and question how justice can be served when monetary interests are often the sole ethical concern for stockholders.

Bench IX is white for a reason, stockholders are predominantly white and the people not only running these companies but also the employees of these companies are largely white guarding a predominately minority crowd. The reverse of the profiteering whites is the veritable damned, placed into prison: the minority, the reprobate, and the black/black sheep. *Bench X* is colored black for this very reason; their take in this scam is prison²³. The disparity is real. Although race is a massive factor even the poor (which are often minority) face similar problems and this has only been exacerbated by the cases of “affluenza” allowing the rich, white killer/pedophile to walk free^{24 25}. These two cases made headlines but statistics show that white offenders spend less time in jail than their fellow minority offenders that committed the same crime²⁶.

Bench IX and Bench X were placed onto the property of PEN Products, a rehabilitation center in eastern Indianapolis that builds, via offender labor, office furniture and other products for resale to corporate and government institutions. The area is essentially a prison surrounded by multiple rows of chain link fence, topped with razor wire. PEN is a division of the Indiana Department of Corrections. I am not commenting so much on whether this facility actually benefits the offenders that work there but more so the idea that people who may have been incarcerated unjustly to begin with are turned into workers for the government’s profit. The benches are

²³ <http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>

²⁴ <http://www.cnn.com/2014/02/05/us/texas-affluenza-teen/>

²⁵ <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/crime/woman-sues-ex-husband-du-pont-heir-dodged-prison-raping-3-year-old-daughter-article-1.1740180>

²⁶ <http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>

also a commentary on the entire criminal justice system in the United States so placing them near any correctional facility was paramount. The employees at PEN are certainly efficient; these benches were removed in less than 24 hours after placement.

Bench XI (Embrace Mortality) was placed at a bus stop on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Street, near 32nd Street (Image 21). 32nd Street ends in a dead end just behind the bench. Also behind the bench is the extreme southwest corner of Crown Hill cemetery, the largest cemetery in the city and the final resting place of one dead president, a drug kingpin, and other lesser footnotes in a history book. I initially considered placing this bench at the Cancer Survivors Memorial at 10th and Indiana Streets but figured that was too easy of a cheap shot.

Bench XI is at an intersection of death. On street named after a dead man, next to a cemetery full of dead people attempting immortality in a slab of granite, and at the end of a dead end street. The dead end street is not the only dead end, so is the cemetery, and perhaps even race relations. I chose “Embrace Mortality” simply because we cannot expect, nor should we want to, live forever. Personally, an atheist (essentially) like myself should be fearful of death. I have no eternity to look forward too and I know this is my only ticket in life. I prefer to look at my life as the allotment in the natural order that I received to do with what I will. When time runs out it is simply the course of history, the course of life. Grind me up and give me back to the *mother*. Don’t give me monuments. Don’t fill my body full of chemicals and bury me in the ground. I’m dead for fuck sakes.

People seem to have an unhealthy obsession with living as long as possible. It is even more disturbing in light of their religious affiliations. Why do we linger? Perhaps everyone is truly an atheist at heart or at least doubts their religion often... except the suicide bombers, those guys at least stick to convictions and actually find solace in the virgins waiting for them in heaven.

Bench XIII (You're staring at it.) was created for my M.F.A. thesis show and is the only bench that had an additional prop associated with it (Image 22). The bench was placed facing a corner that had a large mirror installed on the wall. The text of this piece was backwards so you needed to look at the bench in the mirror to reading it correctly. In doing so the viewer would likely view themselves in the mirror along with a few of the other M.F.A exhibitions that occupied the space.

Bench XIII indirectly tells the viewer the point of my entire project. The reflection is to point the viewers back at themselves. They are the artwork or at least their reaction is the artwork in all the benches. The text is a second clue as to what the crux of the work is focused on. They read the bench in the mirror seeing both the text and themselves. If they walk around the bench and try to read it normally as several people did during the exhibition they are literally looking at the art backwards and if they try to understand the work from this standpoint the meaning will be ass backwards.

Bench I (This is just a bench.) and *Bench II (The art is all in your head.)* were the first two benches I fabricated (Image 23 and 24). These benches were made strictly for the initial critique of the project; thus, they were made in consideration of the critique room itself, and in reference to the overall concept of the series. Both

benches were re-appropriated and turned into new benches once their usefulness in the critique space expired.

Bench I was a declaration that the object you are viewing is simply a bench. The object is not the artwork, only an instigator to the reaction, the real art. *Bench II* echoes this assertion in blatantly telling the viewer that the art is in their head, nowhere else. The reaction only existed in the critique room with the object, but in a way can still exist through the documentation of the work. However, I would argue that the true reaction is that which is experienced with the object, in the place where it is supposed to be.

The location of the object in promoting the concept is paramount, whether that location was intended or serendipitous, as described in *Bench VII (Confess)*. *Bench VII* would no longer be *Bench VII* were the bench relocated. This may be stubbornness to some but it actually has a foundation in my own art adventures. In 2011, I visited the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin, Germany. I was exposed to a rather significant collection of Joseph Beuys work and found particular object of exceptional value conceptually, *Stelle* (Image 25). *Stelle* consisted of a large rectangular sheet of copper placed flat on the floor and surrounded by oddly shaped pieces of felt stained with fat and beeswax; the materials alone says Beuys was here. The word “stelle” means location in German pinpointing its importance to the place in which it exists. The museum guide described the original context for the object, the doorway of a gallery. Beuys intended for the gallery patrons to walk over the object. The sensation of moving from hard metal to soft felt was the actual art.

Once the object was removed from the gallery space and placed into a museum context with the express directive of not being allowed to walk on it, the work ceased to exist and the object was all that was left. Carl Andre seems to have avoided this pitfall, perhaps the inherent durability of his work helps, but who knows in 50 years if we will be allowed to trek across an Andre floor? In any case, *Stelle* was castrated by the museum and then subsequently lost. Context and interactivity was the soul of this work, the object was simply an instigator to the true art.

Conclusion

This supposed to be a thesis and in my academic-based education that means I am supposed to prove my thesis statement. If you are reading this online I must have passed, somehow. Really though, what this entire endeavor proves is that I developed as an artist. Despite my loathing of the art school as an institution it did develop my work to a level in two years that may have taken me a decade otherwise. If you missed the development, I suggest you reread this thesis, and, perhaps, close the Facebook tab on your browser while you do so.

Referenced Images

All images are property of
the artist
unless otherwise indicated.



Image 1. *Crux*, Polyflex Print on Plexi, 2012. Collection of The Glick Eye Institute, Indiana University.

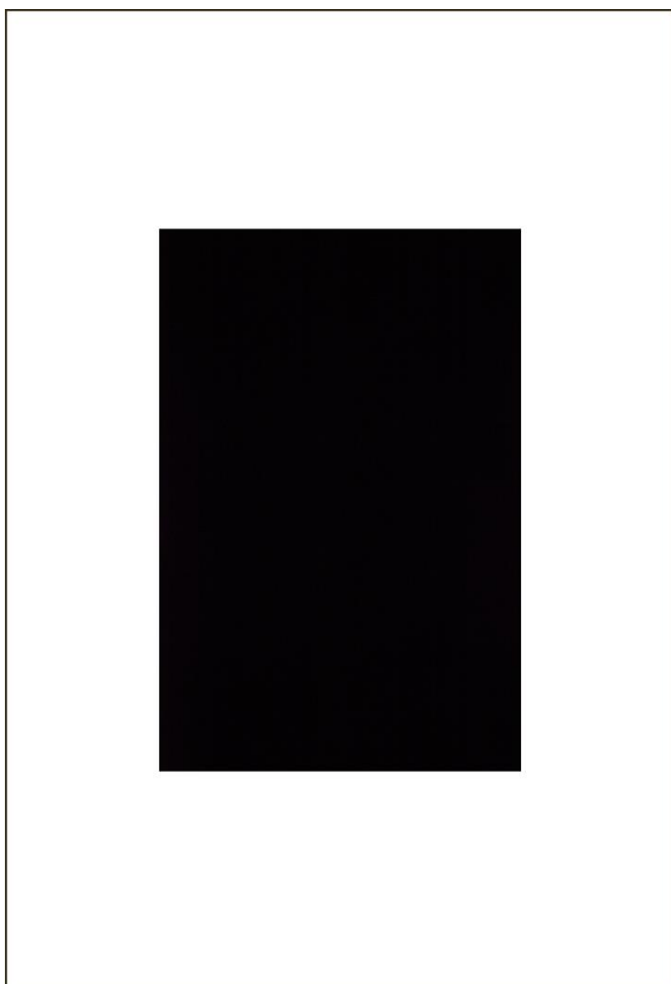


Image 2. *Portrait of a Prophet*, Inkjet Print, 13" x 19", 2012.



Image 3. *Separation*, Concrete and Sand, 14' diameter, 2012.



Image 4. *Reward* poster, Laserjet Print, 8.5" x 11", 2013.

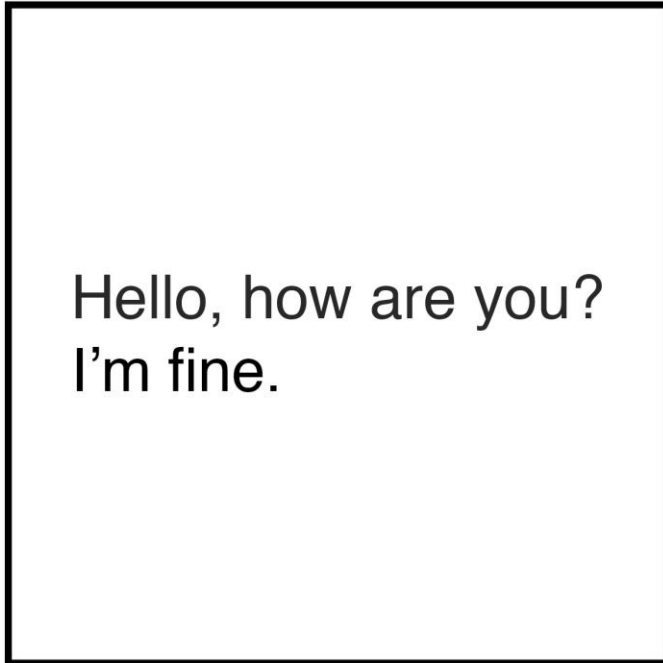


Image 5. Two Lies, Inkjet Print, 16" x 16".
2013.

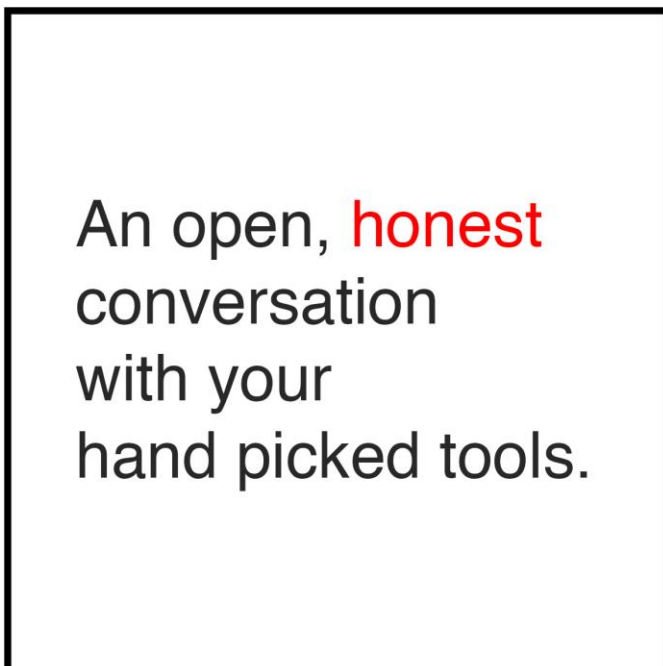


Image 6. *No Bias Here*, Inkjet Print,
16" x 16", 2013.

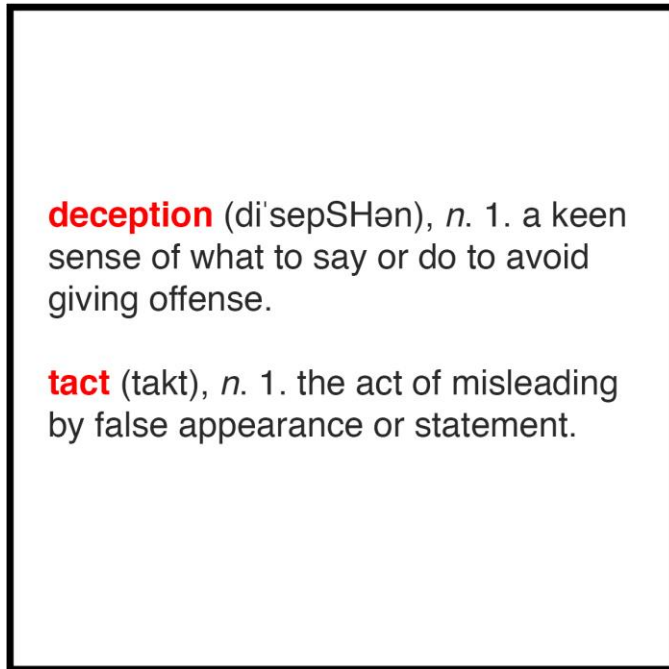


Image 7. *Defined*, Inkjet Print, 16" x 16", 2013.

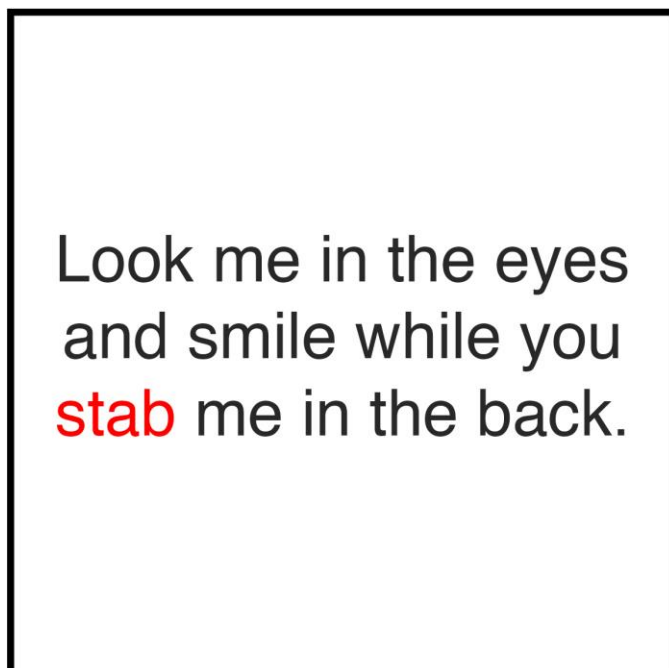


Image 8. *The Way People Are*, Inkjet Print, 16" x 16", 2013.



Image 9. *Knife*, Inkjet Print, 16" x 16", 2013.

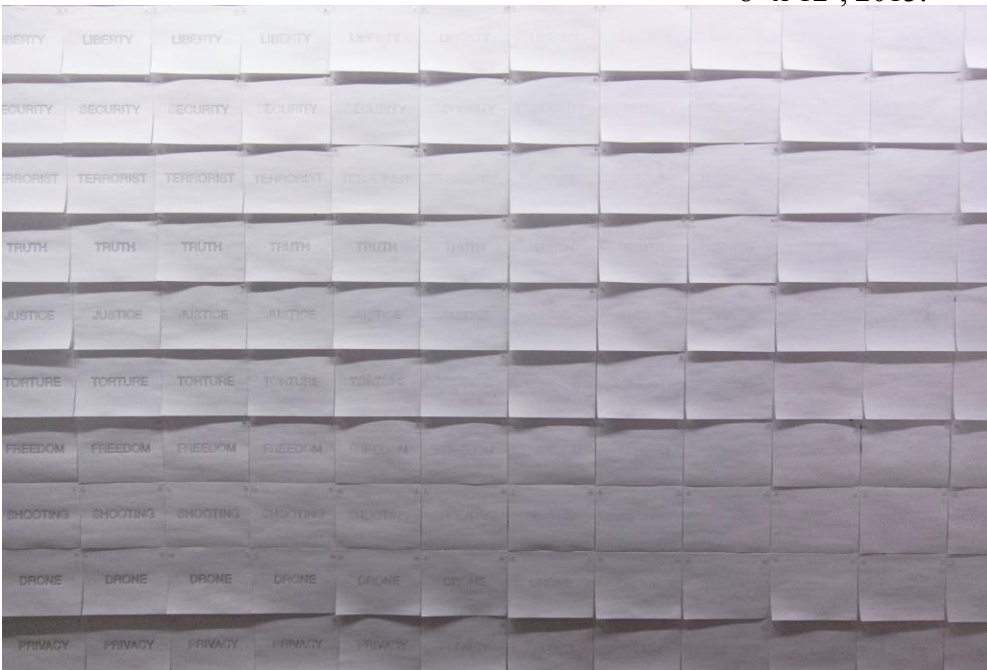


Image 10. *Programming*, Carbon Paper Prints and Push Pins, approx. 8' x 12', 2013.

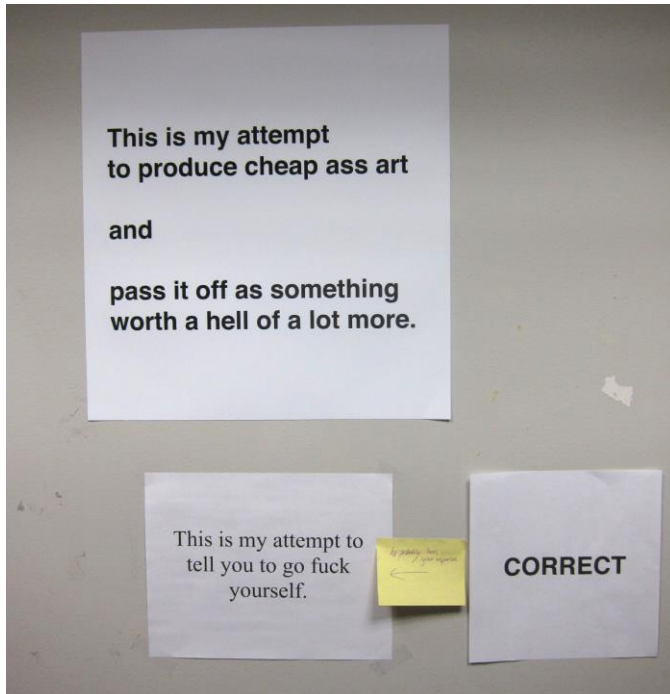


Image 11. Untitled Sign with two responses and a retort, Inkjet Print, 16" x 16", 2013.



Image 12. Untitled Sign (top: alteration one; bottom: alteration two), Inkjet Print, 16" x 16", 2013.

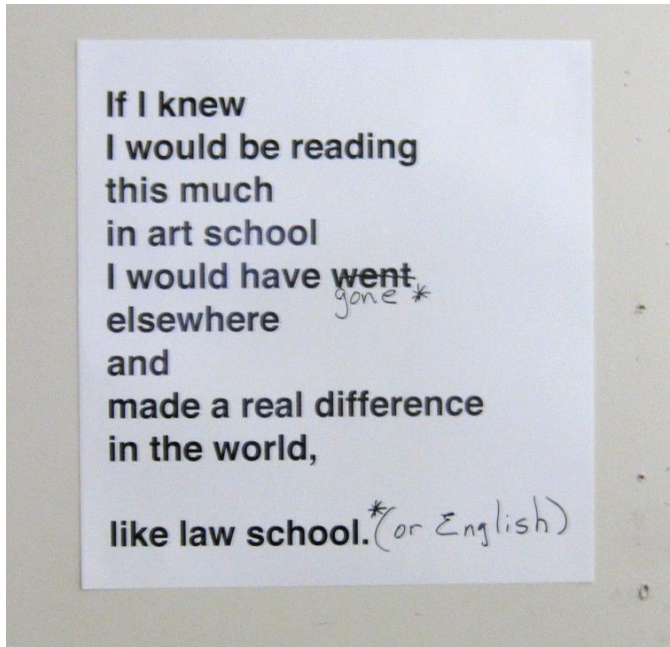


Image 13. Untitled Sign with edits, Inkjet Print, 16" x 16", 2013.



Image 14. *Bench III (There is no better high than discovery.)*, Pine, acrylic paint, and steel hardware, 2014.



Image 15. *Bench IV (Support Our Troops)*, Pine, acrylic paint, and steel hardware, 2014.



Image 16. *Bench V (Discover Jesus)*, Pine, acrylic paint, and steel hardware, 2014.



Image 17. *Bench VI (Now I am become Death, destroyer of worlds)*, Pine, acrylic paint, and steel hardware, 2014.



Image 18. *Bench VII (Confess)*, Pine, acrylic paint, and steel hardware, 2014.



Image 19. *Bench VIII (Sit Alone)*, Pine, acrylic paint, and steel hardware, 2014.



Image 20. *Bench IX (Profit) and Bench X (Prison)*, Pine, acrylic paint, and steel hardware, 2014.



Image 21. *Bench XI (Embrace Mortality)*, Pine, acrylic paint, and steel hardware, 2014.



Image 22. *Bench XIII (You're staring at it.)* Pine, acrylic paint, and steel hardware, 2014.



Image 23. *Bench I (This is just a bench.)* Pine, acrylic paint, and steel hardware, 2014.



Image 24. *Bench II (The art is all in your head)*, Pine, acrylic paint, and steel hardware, 2014.



Image 25. *Stelle*. Joseph Beuys.
Copper, felt, fat, beeswax.
1967. Image courtesy of
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